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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 MINSK 000768

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [BO](#)

SUBJECT: PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR LUKASHENKO ERODING

REF: A. MINSK 458

[1](#)B. MINSK 354

Classified By: Ambassador Karen Stewart for reason 1.4 (d).

Summary

[1](#)1. (SBU) The latest independent public opinion poll confirms a trend of slowly declining support for Belarusian dictator Aleksandr Lukashenko. Most respondents termed the economy as fair, but showed slightly less optimism about economic developments. Cuts in social benefits to take effect in December generate discontent, but with prospects for protest mixed at best. In international relations, Belarusians still feel closer to Russia than the EU, but a cooling toward Russia since the New Year's energy conflict continues. In late 2006 Lukashenko corrected a similar slide in popularity, but some doubt the autocrat can repeat the feat this time. End summary.

[1](#)2. (C) On August 31, Andrey Vardomatskiy, the Director of NOVAK Laboratory polling service, presented the results of an opinion poll conducted August 10-21 to then-Charge, Acting DCM and Acting Pol/Econ Chief. The sample size totaled 1102 respondents.

Support for Lukashenko Continues Gradual Slide

[1](#)3. (C) In August, Aleksandr Lukashenko's public support fell for the sixth straight survey, dating back to November 2006. While the two-percent dip to 44% support was not in itself statistically significant, the steady slide showed what Vardomatskiy termed the "de-crystallization" of the dictator's popularity.

[1](#)4. (SBU) Other politicians failed to improve their popularity, however, as support for all politicians except for Lukashenko remained minuscule.

If new presidential elections were held in Belarus soon, whom would you vote for first?

Lukashenko	43.7%
Milinkevich	3.0%
Kozulin	1.1%
Sidorsky	0.8%
Other	0.6%
No one/Against All	3.0%
Hard to Say	29.8%
Refused/No Answer	16.3%

Nine politicians received less than 0.5% support

## Beginnings of Economic Worries Present

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15. (SBU) Responses to questions on economics changed little from those in surveys earlier in the year, but the minor differences trended toward more uncertainty. Sizable majorities continue to rate their household's material situation and Belarus' economy on the whole as "fair."

How would you rate the current economic situation in Belarus?

Very good	0.9%
Good	15.7%
Fair	56.6%
Bad	19.9%
Very bad	1.4%
Can't Say/NA	5.6%

How would you evaluate your household's current material situation?

Very good	0.5%
Good	10.8%
Fair	61.8%
Bad	22.1%
Very bad	2.3%
Can't Say/NA	2.4%

How do you think the economic situation in Belarus changed in the last month?

Improved	6.4%
Remained the same	64.6%
Worsened	19.0%
Can't Say/No answer	9.9%

How do you think your household's material situation changed in the last month?

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Improved	4.8%
Remained the same	73.6%
Worsened	18.3%
Can't say/No answer	3.3%

## Repeal of Social Benefits Generates Opposition

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16. (SBU) Nine out of ten respondents claimed awareness of the new law to cut social benefits just before the end of the year (ref B). Over half said the measure would affect them at least somewhat. Almost a quarter of those affected said they would vote for a candidate who would try to restore benefits.

If this decision affected you, what would you do in order to really influence the repeal of this decision? (two answers possible)

Nothing	47.3%
Write a letter of complaint to mass media	4.7%
Appeal to a local council member	4.6%
Appeal to a member of parliament	2.5%
Appeal to the president	6.7%
Participate in protest actions	3.9%
Vote for a candidate trying to overturn the law	24.4%
Don't Know/Hard to Say	9.1%

Do you think the repeal of benefits will be to the advantage of the development of our country or not?

Certainly yes	5.5%
Probably yes	20.5%
Probably not	37.1%
Certainly not	21.4%
Don't Know	15.5%

Do you think the decision on the cut of benefits is just or unjust?

Absolutely just	2.8%
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Somewhat just	18.5%
Somewhat unjust	36.1%
Absolutely unjust	34.0%
Don't know	8.7%

#### Attitudes towards Belarus' Neighbors

17. (C) Responses to questions about rapprochement with the EU versus integration with Russia approximated those given in earlier NOVAK Laboratory surveys this year (reftel). The decreased prevalence of pro-Russia attitudes detected since January remains, as does the slight increase in pro-EU opinion. Vardomatskiy said this represents the end of a two-year trend in growing pro-Russia sentiment. Still, if forced to choose between east and west, 47% of Belarusians would favor union with Russia.

18. (C) In one significant change, the public more clearly sees an energy conflict with Russia triggering decreased confidence in the regime. This contrasts with a NOVAK survey in March, when those polled split evenly over the likely consequences of the dispute on support for the regime.

How will the Belarusian people's attitude to the current regime change in consequence of the (energy) conflict?

	March	August
Confidence will definitely increase	3.6%	10.6%
Confidence will rather increase	18.5%	28.0%
Confidence will rather decrease	38.5%	30.3%
Confidence will definitely decrease	14.5%	9.7%
Don't Know/Hard to Say/Refused	24.8%	20.5%

Comment: Will Lukashenko Extinguish the Downward Trend?

19. (C) Last year Lukashenko saw his popularity rise about six percentage points in the fall as end of year bonuses and anti-Russian nationalism in the energy crisis swayed at least some Belarusians. Lukashenko knows better than anyone how to influence Belarusian public opinion, but some suspect his luck will change in his thirteenth year as president. Vardomatskiy told Charge at a reception that even if the economy stays stable, Lukashenko may fall victim to rising expectations after several years of increased wages.

10. (C) Aleksandr Chubrik of the Institute of Privatization and Management (IPM) argues that Lukashenko may even be flirting with consciously shifting his basis of political

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support from the masses to elites. Chubrik, like most analysts, grants that a significant degree of genuine public approval has been an important pillar of Lukashenko's rule. He and his IPM colleagues argue that, with the end of energy subsidies from Russia, Lukashenko may no longer have the resources to buy mass popularity. However, allowing a general sense of malaise to chip away his ratings would suggest a confidence in elite support Lukashenko has never shown.

Stewart